

Rosh HaShanah I 5781/2020
Temple Emanu-El of Haverhill, MA
Virtual services
Cantor Vera Broekhuysen

Who lives, who dies, who acts on your story?

Sung: "Let me tell you what I wish I'd known
When I was young and dreamed of glory
You have no control
Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?"
—*Lin-Manuel Miranda*

Who lives? Who dies? Who tells your story?

On Yom HaZikaron, the Day of Memory—one of the four names of Rosh HaShanah—we tell the stories of those we love who have died. We visit their graves. We remember them around the Rosh HaShanah table. We tell their stories because we love them.

And we tell their stories because their stories impact our own.

Our liturgy of the High Holy Days focuses mostly on the "what" of our story—what kinds of moral behaviour we have demonstrated. Our Unetaneh Tokef prayer, which we're about to chant in Mussaf, asks, inexorably, Who will live? Who will die? But I want to focus today on how and why we tell our stories. How do we share, and hear, our most urgent truths? And how do we let stories move us to action?

Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie teaches about the power of a single story: one overarching narrative, deeply believed, true or false. "How vulnerable we are, in the face of a story," she reminds us. We're vulnerable to our own oversimplifications, to fitting new experience to a predetermined curve. We run the risk of collapsing the details that show us in all of our rich, complex reality, into a freight train of a story that doesn't stop for nuance. A single story is powerful, but a single story is not the whole story.

Some stories creep up on you, a word here, an image there, until suddenly you're immersed in their world and don't quite know how you got there. Other stories hit you with the force of a bullet. Sometimes we don't recognize someone else's story when we meet it—or even more dangerously, don't know all of our own story.

This year, there are two stories to which I have begun to listen better. These are the stories of the internal armed conflict in Guatemala, and of being Black in America.

In Guatemala this past January, on a clergy fellowship with American Jewish World Service, I learned a story of unimaginable loss: the internal armed conflict of 1960–1996, culmination of four centuries of discrimination and attacks on Indigenous Guatemalans—Mayans—since the time of the conquistadores. Whole villages of Mayans were murdered as the government searched for guerrillas fighting for land redistribution. Schools and industrial plants were built later on top of mass graves. Boston-based United Fruit Company's role and US complicity in this conflict were parts of this story I'd never been told.

I see this story's absence in Guatemala City, despite twelve pillars of the main plaza's cathedral engraved with the names of the dead. I hear the silence of Guatemalan officials who still reject the term "genocide." I feel the torn edges of the hole where this story should be, when I think about a government whose health care, judicial, and educational infrastructures literally do not speak twenty-two languages out of its Indigenous population's twenty-three.

When we asked leader after Mayan leader, in Guatemala, what we could do here in the States for them when we came home, the answer was always the same: "Tell our story. Let people hear what happened. Help them understand that our stories are really the same story. What happens to us, to our earth, happens to yours. Fight for it like your mother." As smoke from California's fires shadows New England skies today, I feel that truth.

This year, I have learned more about America's own unheard stories. And I also believe that we have begun to truly hear the story of pervasive white prejudice, conscious or not, that collapses the complexity of Black people walking, talking, breathing, jogging, living their lives, into a single story of threat and diminished humanity. We can no longer ignore the American story of racial bias.

The week before I boarded the plane to Guatemala, I heard Carlotta Walls LaNier, youngest of the Little Rock Nine, speak frankly to a high school here about her experience desegregating an all-white high school in Arkansas in 1957. Many of us are upset this fall because our children can't safely go into their school buildings due to the coronavirus. President Eisenhower had to call in the 101st Airborne Division to protect Carlotta and her eight Black classmates' right to enter Little Rock Central High. Her story was riveting—and listening to her low, measured voice, watching her facial expressions and body language, taking in her experience, I found myself beginning to care about her as a person, an individual. The facts of her story are well-documented, but facts don't impact the way a person in front of you does. I read Carlotta's book, *A Mighty Long Way*, as we flew into Guatemala City. I carried her story with me there.

Carlotta's story began generations ago and it hasn't ended yet. That story includes Jacob Blake, and Ahmaud Arbery. Breonna Taylor. George Floyd. Sandra Bland. Tamir Rice. Amadou Diallo. Emmett Till. And that story includes Christopher Columbus, Thomas Jefferson, Lt. Colonel George Custer, Plessy v. Ferguson, Migrant Protection Protocols.

Last weekend, I had the privilege of hearing Professor Ralph Jordan of UMass Lowell speak on a Merrimack Valley NAACP panel: "As a country," he said, "we have downplayed the importance of race for 400 years ... The police are bearing the brunt of this—they're armed, they're a major point of intersection—but they're part of a society that has taught ALL of us that people of color are "less than"... If we want to change society, we have to have that historical knowledge and pass it on to the young people so that they come away with a more historical and complete understanding of race in America."

I grew up hearing the story that racism was over in America, that race was unimportant. I remember going up to the microphone at a school forum during Black History Month and saying, my earnest eighth grade self, "Why should race be something we notice about someone? I think we shouldn't care about race; instead we should ask something like "what kind of music do you like?"

Understandable, perhaps, but I was dead wrong. I had the privilege of thinking race was unimportant because it didn't affect me personally. Racial prejudice affects whether Black and brown people have enough to eat and pay the bills, a safe place to live, access to healthcare and its quality once they're in front of a provider. Race affects personal safety, in America and in Guatemala and in too many places on this hurting earth to list. We cannot close our eyes and ears and say: race shouldn't matter so it doesn't matter.

This is a new year. It's time for us to open up. Kol dodi dofeik—the voice of my beloved family member, friend, neighbor of color is knocking, saying "Hey, do you see me? Do you hear me? Do you know that I need your help to right this wrong?"

We are asked now to listen to and to believe stories that will shift the ground beneath our feet, perhaps make people and institutions that have felt protective all our lives seem less so. And that's scary. But I encourage you to listen, and to not turn away, because when we hear a story of harm caused wilfully or by mistake we can change the course of that story. We can heal.

Author Colum McCann shared with our Temple in August about his own practice of listening to another person's story: "I have to come to it empty, and say, I know nothing. I want to hear you. I can't respond or contradict or put any of my own stuff in it." On Yom Kippur, we Jews literally show up empty, fasting, to hear our communal story of error and effort to put it right.

God, in our liturgy, is the ultimate storyteller, creator of Torah. Torah's most frequent verses are "Vaydabeir Adonai el Moshe leimor" and "Vayomeir Adonai el Moshe leimor": God spoke to Moshe, saying And God is the ultimate listener. God is shomeia t'fillah, the One who hears prayer. We understand as Jews that if we don't spend time listening to Torah and speaking Torah, we won't act according to Torah. Its story won't inform our values or our deeds.

When we truly hear and care about a story, we act on it. The story of Jewish redemption from Egypt begins when the Israelites cry out—vayiz'aku—and God hears their cry, na'akatam, and

remembers God's covenant with them, and is moved to act to free them. [Sh'mot 2:23–4]
Without sharing a story, without those in power responding to it, oppression continues.

With AJWS, I visited the Casa de la Memoria “Kaji Tulam” (House of Memory) in January. It's a civilian-funded and civilian-operated museum, founded by a human rights collective, in the heart of Guatemala City. It's a testimony of race-and-gender-based violence in Guatemala. The museum tells this story through carefully crafted space, a journey through Guatemalan time and experience. The Mayans I met use art to tell their story: theater, music, dance, posters, memes. They tell it in their silence, their requests that their names not be used and faces not be shown. They tell it in the slow, careful, loving, underfunded work of forensic anthropologists, identifying and reuniting bones from unidentified graves with bereaved families. And Mayans tell their story through, and in, their active resistance to the ongoing oppression of their land. They work for change in Guatemalan land usage and ownership, use that respects the land. They work for the return of power to Mayan local structures of authority. They organize and they tell the Mayan story so that they will not be the last ones to tell it.

In America, I believe that we are seeing the beginnings of an earnest attempt to better hear the story of institutional racism, and to work to dismantle it. Right here in Haverhill, the organization POSE (Power of Self Education) hosted two extraordinary community conversations this spring in the wake of George Floyd's murder: one between community leaders, speaking about racism and race relations in the Merrimack Valley, and one open mic in which any Haverhill resident who wanted was invited to come and tell their own truth and be heard by their elected officials. These conversations were open. They were, at times, uncomfortable. They were honest. And what their participants shared has sown the seeds of equalizing change right here in our community.

Professor Ralph Jordan teaches that dealing with economic racial inequality and other forms of structural racism, is an OPPORTUNITY to make ourselves better. “We shouldn't shy away from this—we should welcome it! ... This is about getting to a more equitable society and we have to learn and grow together.”

The poet Yehuda Amichai writes:

I want to be written again
in the Book of Life, to be written every single day
till the writing hand hurts.
“I Walked Past a House Where I Lived Once”
—Yehuda Amichai

That writing hand, my friends, is ours. Our actions write those words.

We can come, empty, to one another's stories and say, "hineini"—here I am. I want to hear you. And I want you to hear me. And I want to act with you to make this world a better place.

We are more than the sum of our stories, because we are in each other's stories too. We change one another's lives.

Last night, with the first minutes of this New Year, we lost a g'dolat hador, a giant of our generation: Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Justice Ginsburg's monumental and unceasing efforts on behalf of gender equality and human dignity were unparalleled. She fought for justice for all, as a Jew and as an American, always understanding that what happens in one part of the world affects every part. Justice Ginsburg spoke in 2006 about the landmark 1954 school desegregation decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* [at the Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria, South Africa], the decision that allowed Carlotta Walls LaNier to attend Little Rock Central High three years later. "To sum up," she said, "*Brown* both reflected and propelled the development of human rights protection internationally. It was decided with the horrors of the Holocaust in full view, and with the repressive regimes in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and South Africa a then-current reality. It propelled an evolution yet unfinished toward respect, in law and in practice, for the human dignity of all the world's people."

May her memory be for a blessing. May her example propel each one of us forward, that we may never be lazy in the yet unfinished work of "respect, in law and practice, for the human dignity of all the world's people."

Z'chor lanu, Elohim Chayyim. Remember us, God of Life. How will we use our power to tell our children's children a story of human love, of justice, of respect? How will we write one another into the Book of Life?

Shanah tovah.